

Before You Read

from *Poor Richard's Almanack*

Make the Connection

Quickwrite

TV talk shows, radio call-in programs, newspaper columns, how-to books, inspirational speakers—sometimes today's world seems to overflow with people who want to give advice. Dispensing wisdom—or at least reflections on one's own experience—has become an American industry. Why do you think so many readers and listeners flock to advice givers? Make a list of three pieces of advice you would give to an incoming freshman at your school.

Literary Focus

Aphorisms

An **aphorism** is a brief, cleverly worded statement that makes a wise observation about life. Aphorisms grow out of speeches, sermons, religious texts such as the Bible ("Love your neighbor"), poems and stories, advertisements, and most commonly, the expressions of ordinary people in ordinary situations.

Aphorisms can serve many purposes. They entertain, especially through their humor, wit, and wordplay; they instruct, suggesting ways to overcome obstacles, solve problems, and achieve success; and they inspire, often providing a kind of moral uplift. Aphorisms can also **satirize**, using humor to mock and criticize the way things are. They can address any subject—from war and peace to the fleas on a dog.

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For more on Aphorisms, see the Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms.

Background

With the publication of *Poor Richard's Almanack* in 1732, Franklin found his biggest publishing success, and he continued to publish his almanac for twenty-five years. Almost every house had an almanac. Almanacs calculated the tides and the phases of the moon, forecast the weather for the next year, and even provided astrological advice. Many almanacs also supplied recipes, jokes, and aphorisms. Poor Richard was an imaginary astrologer with a critical wife named Bridget. One year Bridget wrote the aphorisms to answer those her husband had written the year before on female idleness. Another time Bridget included "better" weather forecasts so that people would know the good days for drying their clothes.

Franklin's practicality shows itself not only in the content of his almanacs but also in the way he put them together: He took his wit and wisdom wherever he found it. He printed old sayings translated from other languages, lifted some aphorisms from other writers, and adapted others from popular and local sources. An American to the core, Franklin never hesitated to rework what he found to suit his own purposes. For example, for the 1758 almanac, Franklin skimmed all his previous editions to compose a single speech on economy. This speech, called "The Way to Wealth," has become one of the best known of Franklin's works. It has been mistakenly believed to be representative of Poor Richard's wisdom. Poor Richard often called for prudence and thrift, but he just as often favored extravagance.



Reading Standard 3.1
Analyze characteristics of subgenres that are used in prose.

from *Poor Richard's Almanack* Benjamin Franklin

1. Love your neighbor; yet don't pull down your hedge.
2. If a man empties his purse into his head, no man can take it away from him. An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.
3. Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.
4. Tart words make no friends; a spoonful of honey will catch more flies than a gallon of vinegar.
5. Glass, china, and reputation are easily cracked and never well mended.
6. Fish and visitors smell in three days.
7. He that lieth down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.
8. One today is worth two tomorrows.
9. A truly great man will neither trample on a worm nor sneak to an emperor.
10. A little neglect may breed mischief; for want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of a horse the rider was lost; for want of the rider the battle was lost.
11. If you would know the value of money, go and try to borrow some; he that goes a-borrowing goes a-sorrowing.
12. He that composes himself is wiser than he that composes books.
13. He that is of the opinion that money will do everything may well be suspected of doing everything for money.
14. If a man could have half his wishes, he would double his troubles.
15. 'Tis hard for an empty bag to stand upright.
16. A small leak will sink a great ship.
17. A plowman on his legs is higher than a gentleman on his knees.
18. Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterward.
19. Nothing brings more pain than too much pleasure; nothing more bondage than too much liberty.



Panel from an engraving for Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard Illustrated* (c. 1800).

The Granger Collection, New York.


Literary Response and Analysis

from *The Autobiography*


Reading Check

1. What was Franklin's condition in life when he arrived in Philadelphia?
2. What does Franklin say must happen before people can depend on correct moral behavior?
3. Why does Franklin place temperance first on his list?
4. How many "courses" of his list of virtues does Franklin plan to go through in one year?

Interpretations

5. What **inferences** can you make about Franklin's attitudes and beliefs, based on his plan to achieve moral perfection? If Franklin were alive today, what modern causes might he support? Explain. 
6. Franklin writes about "arriving at moral perfection" just as he had earlier written about his arrival in the city of Philadelphia. What does this similarity in his language reveal about Franklin's philosophical assumptions?

Evaluation

7. Compare Robert Fulghum's list of things learned in kindergarten (see the **Connection** on page 72) to Franklin's list of virtues. Which list do you think would be more useful to people today? In general, how does Franklin's scheme for moral perfection compare with the self-help books available today? Be sure to refer to your Quickwrite notes. 

Literary Criticism

8. Reactions to *The Autobiography* have sometimes been negative. Read the following comment by satirist Mark Twain. What is Twain's **tone** in this paragraph—that is, his attitude toward Ben Franklin?

[Franklin had] a malevolence which is without parallel in history; he would work all day and then sit up nights and let on to be studying algebra by the light of a smoldering fire, so that all the boys might have to do that also, or else have Benjamin Franklin thrown upon them. Not satisfied with these proceedings, he had a fashion of living wholly on bread and water, and studying astronomy at mealtime—a thing which has brought affliction to millions of boys since, whose fathers had read Franklin's pernicious biography.

—Mark Twain

The word *pernicious* (pər-nish'əs), in the last sentence, means "deadly." What elements of Franklin's autobiography is Twain attacking? How do you feel about Twain's grumblings?

from *Poor Richard's Almanack*

Interpretations

1. Poor Richard's aphorisms often succeed because of their **implied metaphors**, or metaphors that do not state explicitly the two things being compared. Re-read aphorisms 4, 7, 15, and 16. Then, identify what each of the following images might mean: a spoonful of honey, lying down with dogs, an empty bag, a small leak.
2. Many of Poor Richard's aphorisms convey moral lessons. Choose one of the aphorisms, and restate it in your own words, explaining its moral lesson.
3. Which of the aphorisms reveals a healthy skepticism and humor about human nature?



Reading Standard 2.5


Analyze an author's implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

Reading Standard 3.1

Analyze characteristics of subgenres in prose.

Writing

Becoming Virtuous

Using your Quickwrite notes, write a short handbook titled *Surviving Freshman Year*. Create **aphorisms** to make your advice short and memorable. 

Comparing Texts

In an **essay**, compare and contrast Franklin with Jonathan Edwards (page 44). Be sure to consider each man's goals in life and the philosophy behind those goals. Are these Americans alike in any ways?

Vocabulary Development

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate word from the list below:

arduous facilitate eradicate
rectitude subsequent

In order to _____ his task, Franklin tried to _____ everything that stood in the way of moral _____. It was an _____ program, but his _____ career proved it was worth the effort.

Grammar Link MINI-LESSON

Linking It Up: Coordinating Conjunctions

Here's one way to describe one of Benjamin Franklin's projects for self-improvement:

Benjamin Franklin knew that arriving at moral perfection would be difficult. He was willing to give it a try.

Here's a better way to express the same information:

Benjamin Franklin knew that arriving at moral perfection would be difficult, yet he was willing to give it a try.

In the second example, the writer combined two related thoughts into a single sentence with a connective word—in this case, the coordinating conjunction **yet**. A **coordinating conjunction** joins words or word groups that are used in the same way. Separating two thoughts into two sentences is not incorrect; there are times when short, simple sentences sound best. However, using coordinating conjunctions to combine two thoughts into one sentence can result in more graceful syntax, or sentence structure.

Some Connective Words and What They Indicate	
Conjunction	Indicates
and	similarity, addition
but	opposition, contrast
yet	opposition, contrast
or	choice
nor	negation
so	cause and effect, result
for	explanation

All the words in the chart above function as coordinating conjunctions, but some can also function as other parts of speech.